

## [Town Meeting Government]

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[?]

Name: Robert Wilder

Assignment: Northfield Mass. 1938-9

Town Meeting Government

(Government by Farce)

Chapter One - The Town Meeting

The Town Hall was so well heated that you could smell the odor of hot paint. A huge "air tight" stove at the rear of the hall sitting on a worn square of zinc nailed to the floor was the source of the holocaust. This stove had a long and rickety pipe suspended by wires over the center aisle of the hall, the end of which disappeared through a mildewed cherub that decorated the proscenium arch of the tiny stage. The gallery was crowded with the students of civil government from the local schools, and a few curious strangers. Few people were sitting on the long wooden benches with uncomfortable backs on the main floor, to which only the registered voters of the town were admitted. Most were standing in the rear and in the entry way, gathered in groups, and talking in low tones with many a cautious glance over their shoulders to discourage eaves - droppers. On the stage Mrs. Quabbin, the portly Town Clerk, was seated behind an undraped table that divided her into two sections. The upper section showed a solemnly clothed dignified bust surmounted by a serious, bespectacled face. The lower section - the most prominent by far from the floor of the meeting - disclosed feet shod for comfort and not for style, cotton hosed legs that would have made a grand piano jealous, and uncompromisingly revealed that the

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Clerk was a devotee of warm, woolen underwear. She was reading in a weak voice the entire Town Warrant that had been posted for days, printed in the local paper, and whose contents were an old story to the voters present.

The Warrant is not without interest for those among us who bewail our lack of tradition. It was the town meeting warrant used in Colonial days and carried on down into the present. It began:

“To either of the Constables of the Town of Swampfield, (There are at present four constables) Greeting:

“In the name of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, you are hereby directed to notify and warn the inhabitants of said Town, qualified to vote in elections and in Town Affairs, to meet at the Town Hall in said town on Monday, February 3, 193- at 10 o'clock in the a.m., then and there to act on the following articles:

“Article 1. To choose a Moderator to preside at said Meeting.

“Article 2. To hear the reports of the several town officers and act there on.

“Article 3. To choose all necessary town officers for the ensuing year.....

Then follow articles for the support of the schools, the roads, the library, the care of the trees, lighting the streets, town charges, gypsy moths, community nurse - all the many details where money is needed for running the town, each with its separate article.

Article 21 for this year reads, “To see if the town will vote to pay a bounty of twenty cents each on hedgehogs and raise and appropriate the sum of \$25 for that purpose, or take any vote or votes in relation thereto.”

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At the end of the articles the advice to the constables continues: "And you are directed to serve this Warrant by posting up attested copies 3 thereof at the Post Offices the Schoolhouse in District No. 2, and the store of V. Stone in District No. 3.

"Hereof fail not, and make due return of this warrant, with your doings thereon, to the Town Clerk, at the time and place of meeting, as aforesaid.

"Given under our hands, this twentieth day of January, in the year of Our Lord, one thousand nine hundred and thirty eight." And both the original and attested documents bear the signatures of the then reigning Selectmen, the group of three that sit in remote splendor on a bench to one side, modestly back from the front. The fact is that they sort of huddle. They huddle, doubtless, for mutual protection. Today is not the open season on deer. But it is on selectmen - and other town officials. On the three hundred odd other days of the year the selectmen are above the common reach. But on town meeting days the law on them is off. They can be reached by any penniless voter with a sharp wit, or a gift for fluent speech. The Honorable Board of Selectmen well know that various articles have been inserted in the town warrant for the sole purpose of gaining the legal right to ask them pointed and embarrassing questions. And that the "town meeting lawyers" will not hold their hands - not with the bored students of civil government in the gallery ready to burst into a merry laugh at a witticism, and to applaud the discomfiture of the great men of the town. They know these "lawyers" have been preparing their speeches and rehearsing them for weeks. And, as there averages at least one practiced proponent for every article, and the 4 honorable board has to deliver its weighty, but halting, advice upon every article, they are now wondering why in Tophet they ever yearned for the position of a selectman anyway.

This explains in part their unusual redness in the face, and their nervous and distraught actions. But the unaccustomed splendor of their best or "other" clothes contributes. There's still a faint hope, however. If their side has strength enough to carry article one, a friendly moderator will be in the chair, and the meeting will be less of a Roman holiday. Part of

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the heckling, at least, will be ruled out, and the sound sense displayed in their halting utterances will be brought out. In the meantime they sweat, run their fingers around their collars and smooth their unruly hair and bald heads. All of which tends to explain the creaking and squeaking of the well-worn wooden bench.

The nervousness is not confined to the selectmen. The other town officers are nervous, too.. For they know that there are embarrassing questions that can be asked of them. And, even if none are, that their fellow town officers will not hesitate to “pass the buck” if it appears that by so doing they can save their own feelings. And the “town meeting lawyers,” how the great day has arrived are having attacks of stage fright. Nobody is having a good time at this juncture except the students in the gallery who have been excused from school to witness the demonstration of democracy in its essence, as exemplified by a genuine New England Town Meeting.

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The Town Clerk rises as she finishes reading the warrant, and puts the question in regard to the choice of Moderator under Article 1. The two expected nominations are given from the floor. Then someone moves for a “paper ballot.” It is seconded and carried by a chorus of “Yeas.” The clerk appoints two tellers to assist her. And the fight is on.

After the Moderator is chosen, a motion is made to take up Article 3. This is the article in regard to the election of officers. It is carried without opposition, for it is a routine matter in regard to opening and closing the polls.

The polling place is on one side of the town hall floor, where benches have been removed to give space. The desks on which the voters mark their ballots in secret are cubby holes side by side on a long plank laid on high carpenters’ horses. Each has a stub of a pencil attached by a string, and a copy of the abstract of laws imposing penalties on voters for fraudulent voting, tacked in such a way that it is impossible to read without creating the impression that one is trying to spy on his neighbor's ballot. The whole arrangement bears

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a striking resemblance to a row of hen's nests in a poultry establishment. But it is the usual thing. There is a table for two checkers at the entrance, and another for two more at the exit. Inside, also, is a table for counting the ballots, and a machine with a crank and bell in which the voter deposits his ballot. The machine has an indicator on it that tells whoever cares to look, the total number of ballots that have been cast.

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is simple. A voter appears at the entrance. The list of voters is scanned for his name. If found, it is marked by a pencilled check, and a printed ballot handed him. This is an assurance against "repeaters" which is hardly necessary in a small town where everyone is known, and a stranger is conspicuous. The voter takes his ballot to an empty hen's nest of his own choice, and with the stub of pencil on the string marks his ballot with X's in the proper places in accordance with his conscience. That is, he used the stub of pencil if the lead is still intact, which it generally is not after the first rush of voting. He then folds his ballot and takes it to the checkers at the exit. Here his name is checked on another list, apparently to [?] catch any Dr. Jekylls and Mr. Hydes among the voters, or to prevent one from oning donning a disguise in the sacred precincts of the polling place. After his name is found and checked he places his ballot on the slide of the machine between the knees of a dignified official, resplendent in his "other suit" and suitably grave as befits the occasion, who solemnly turns the crank, and the ballot slides into a locked box at the tinkle of a bell, and the click of another number on the indicator. Now that his ballot is safely in the locked machine, the voter has done his civic duty and is at large on the floor of the town meeting.

Most voters have the comfortable feeling that no one will ever know how they voted. They shouldn't be too sure. They should vote as their consciences dictate. Nevertheless, the way they vote isn't necessarily a secret between them and their God. And all the corruption is not confined to the vile cities. Listen to the words of an expert - 7 a man in middle life who had repeatedly been elected selectman. "Yes," he says, "We fooled 'em that time. I passed word around about what the double-crossers had done and told my people not to vote until late in the day. Then I walked up good and early and voted the way they hoped

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I would. I knew the bunch would grab my ballot just as soon as my back was turned. And when they'd see I was a sucker, they'd figger that the election was in the bag, and not to do no more work. By the time my people come in votin' different than I done it would be too late to rout out their hard to git voters and they'd be licked. Well, they was."

How did they "grab his ballot as soon as his back was turned?" They didn't. Not literally. But they got its content when the block of ballots was removed from the machine.

If the counters waited until the polls were closed before starting to count and tabulate the ballots, election returns would not be available until the next day. Ballots are therefore removed from the machine when a certain number have accumulated. The exact number being set by the local election officials, and may be twenty five, or fifty, or a hundred - the idea being to keep the counters busy, and make prompt returns of the results. The ballots fall into the machine one on [?] top of the other in the order in which the voters voted. If ten people voted after Smith, then Smith's ballot is the eleventh from the top of the pile. That is the principle, and the practice depends upon the circumstances.

The election officials are fron from both the major political parties.

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Some are small fry politicians, and some are strictly honest, unsuspecting folk. But it isn't necessary to have a corrupt official - not in a town meeting election. A voter on the floor of the town meeting blessed with good eye sight and hearing is enough. He watches the voting and computes the number of the ballot he wants. When the block is taken from the machine it is always kept in full sight. That is the law. Otherwise there might be substitutions. And the counter pick them up one at a time and reads the results aloud, while his partner enters them in the proper column on a tabulation sheet. When the desired ballot is reached, all the listener has to do is to fill in a tabulation of his own.

The paid workers for a party are checked as they bring in their voters. A simple case would be of a bus load that begins voting as the machine is emptied, and whose votes just make

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a block of votes so that the machine is emptied again. That block of ballots all came from the bus load, and should be all Democratic, or all Republican names. But, if it is not, the double-crosser can be found by consulting a list of names made in the order in which the bus load voted. "Honesty is still the best policy," even in the town meeting political world.

While the voting drones on, punctuated by the tinkle of the machine bell, the town meeting takes up the spectator's attention. Articles are called up, passed, amended, or rejected. A curious feature is that a town may appropriate many thousands of dollars for a bridge, or school, with practically no debate. And then spend a whole hour threshing out the details of an article like the hedgehog one previously quoted.

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The Swampfield Town Hall is probably unique in respect to its lighting. On each side are windows almost the height of the room. And the panes are of colored glass, ten by eighteen inches. They are of assorted colors, arranged in a haphazard manner. The groups of voters are of different colors according to where they are sitting. If one stands he may be two or three colors. The effect is particularly impressive on a sunny day, with an impassioned orator speaking. As the sun moves, the voters' colors change, and it seems to be caused by the oratory. As a cloud passes over the sun, the colors dim, as though the hearers' minds were wandering. And, if the sun comes out brightly during the peroration the effect is marvellous. It can be noted, however, that some people who were green when they started, end by being quite red. But it is doubtful if their opinions change along with their colors.

Resolutions are sometimes offered in town meeting, and requests made to give some non-resident the privilege of the floor in case his advice is needed, or he has some message that is deemed important enough to come before the town. But it is the unusual and unexpected that makes the meeting the institution it is. One never knows just what is going to happen. People who are not used to making public addresses often do queer things.

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The story is still told in Swampfield of one religious man, who would never use as strong a word as “darn”, feeling so earnestly that the electric lighting company was abusing the people that he arose in town meeting to make a motion. After he was recognized by the chair, he got so flustered that he could only open and shut his mouth. But 10 feeling that it was up to him to go through with it, now that he had put his hand to the plow, he burst out with, “Mr. Moderator - I move we tell the power company to go to hell!” The people were so dumfounded at hearing this language from the speaker, that no one thought to second the motion. It, therefore, missed being recorded in the Clerk's book, or of being thrown open to debate and some wondrous amendments added.

While there is usually fun, tempers get pretty badly frayed, and everyone welcomes the rest when the Moderator finally announces about noon, that the Grange has dinner ready in the basement, tickets thirty-five cents, and, if he hears no objection, he the meeting stands recessed until one o'clock. Chapter 2 8/25/39 [?]

Name Robert Wilder

Title New England Town Government

Assignment Northfield

Topic The Town Clerk Mass. 1938-9 THE TOWN CLERK

Mrs. Quabbin, the town clerk, wiped the flour from her hands on one corner of the checked apron that enveloped her generous form. “Just a minute,” she said, “until I look at the things in the oven.” The errand completed, she wedged herself into the enormous chair before the tiny desk that served as a center table for the room. The desk was neat, as was the room. In fact everything was neat about Mrs. Quabbin — except her husband. He was neat only on occasion. As plumber and town Constable he, apparently blacked himself daily for his work after the manner of an end man in a minstrel show. But for scheduled public appearances, like church, or town meeting, he appeared scrubbed,



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renovated, his hair plastered down, his noxious pipe and “eating tobacco” removed, and his handkerchiefs given a shot of cologne water. The transformation was indeed startling. And the villagers thought they saw in it the smooth, ham-like hand of Mrs. Quabbin.

Mrs. Quabbin's desk was not really small. It was simply dwarfed by the bulk of its owner, and that of a potted geranium that stood on one corner. The Town Clerk's gray eyes twinkled behind the steel spectacles, and dimples appeared in her kindly face. One gathered that Mrs. Quabbin had been very good looking indeed before she had begun to age and put on weight.

“A town official, a town clerk especially, is supposed to be an impersonal machine for conducting the town's business. We are guided 2 by law, and never let our feelings, our likes or dislikes, enter in. I record all the votes passed at the town meeting, swear in the elected officials, send the Secretary of State the names of the elected town officers on blanks that he sends me, and a list of the constables to the Clerk of Courts of the county. Then I have to keep up an index of all the papers that are filed with me that the law orders to be recorded. They are public. Anyone may see them who wishes. And I try to be agreeable while showing them to them.

“Oh, we've had clerks and clerks. This town was founded during the sixteen hundreds, you know. And it always had a town clerk. No, even I don't remember the first of them. But I do remember some cautions!

“There was one who always seemed so agreeable. But he'd ask questions that were none of his business. And after the person left you'd see him streaking across the street to pass on the caller's business to his cronies. Likely enough it would be in the paper, too. For he was the correspondent of one of the city papers. He claimed to be old Yankee stock. But I don't think he was. He didn't act like ‘em. And he didn't look like ‘em either. He was short and round and had brown eyes. Let me tell it, he had Indian or colored blood — I don't

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know but that he had both. Yes, it was on his account that I got elected to office in the first place. Principally because he got into a fight with the undertaker, though.

“Oh, dear! It is fairly complicated. An undertaker is not supposed to bury a body without a permit. And, in a small town like 3 this one, the town clerk issues the permit. But the town clerk is a bonded official. We want proof that a person is really dead before we issue a permit to bury the body. Don't say I said so, but if the law hadn't thrown up a few safeguards, the undertaker might bury some of our selectmen and nobody miss 'em! As it is, they are fairly safe.

“The undertaker has to get the physician who attended the deceased to certify that the person is dead, and give the cause of death. In the case of an accidental death, the medical examiner for the county does it. The undertaker takes this certificate and brings it to me and I record it for the vital statistics. After I have received this certificate, and it is in order, I give the undertaker a burial certificate. Sometimes, the doctor is busy and fails to make out a death certificate. It isn't so bad when the doctor lives right here, but when a body is shipped in to town for burial, and the undertaker can't get a permit to bury it, the matter becomes real troublesome. The former town clerk would do nothing about it. The cemetery people won't even open a grave without a permits and, of course, the undertaker would go frantic when the time for the funeral and burial arrived, and, unless somebody did something about it, he was going to be left with a corpse on his hands. However, I found a perfectly legal way around the trouble. And I haven't got into any difficulty over it yet. All I have to do is to get another physician to certify to the facts as near as he can find out. Then I issue the burial permit. And when the attending physician gets time he sends me his certificate. I put both certificates and the explanation into the record. It's just one 4 of those things, you know. You can't expect a physician to bother about a death certificate when he is doing his best to save a life. And you can't expect an undertaker to keep the deceased on hand indefinitely just because someone failed to make out a paper. And you can't expect relatives and friends of the person to postpone the burial service. Naturally,

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they'd blame the undertaker. Perhaps you see why the undertaker worked so hard to elect me.

“Yes, I had business training. When I was young I was bookkeeper for a concern that made horse whips. Then I was secretary to the head of a pretty large firm where I learned something about law. I left there when I was married. The truth is that they didn't like my husband. There was nothing against him except that he had been divorced. Now, Fillup is a good man. There's absolutely nothing against him — and he's a great deal brighter than he looks. We came here where Fillup had bought the plumbing shop. Pretty soon he was elected constable. And when the undertaker came to me and asked if I would run for town clerk — he knew of the experience I'd had - I did it. And I've been town clerk ever since.

“I'll never forget that election. In fact, we had to have two as the first came out a tie. It is the second election that I remember best, for before the first I didn't think I had a chance. But when I saw how near I had come to being elected I was sorry that I hadn't made more effort. The town clerk's salary and fees would have been a great help to Fillup. I didn't worry about the work. I knew that I could do it. And the town clerk didn't really need the job anyway. He was always telling about the money he had in the bank, and criticizing people for not laying up money. He'd never put any in anything but the savings banks, and about all the fun he had out of his money was in watching the interest pile up. He was just a human squirrel that saves money instead of nuts. I don't think that a squirrel would be fool enough to collect all the nuts he does and then not eat all he wanted — just get along on as few as he could and take pride in the size of his pile. But the size of his pile is all that the human squirrel takes any pleasure in. They don't understand that the things money can buy, that the memories of places seen and things done are of a lot more real value than the columns of figures in a bank book. Well, I don't know why I should be preaching to you. But perhaps you gathered that I think the former town clerk was just plain stupid.

“It was an awful cold day, late in February, when the election was held to decide on who was to be town clerk. Our town hall had burned down, so the election was held in the

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basement of the church. The town clerk was there. He was in charge of the election. Whenever a voter would come in, a-blowin' on his hands and stamping his feet, the clerk would rush up with a beaming smile, shake him by the hand, and thank him for making the effort of coming on such a cold day. The undertaker, it's a big word for it, was my campaign manager. He saw that the clerk was getting quite a few votes with his friendly manner, and he didn't like it. He wouldn't let me do the same thing. He said that would not be lady-like. The undertaker didn't feel like doing it himself. He never forgets that he is the undertaker. And he didn't feel that it was quite the thing for the undertaker to greet the voters. Finally, he thought of the coal man. And the coal man was willing. He is a jolly, loud-spoken man. He came with the coal pretty well washed off his face, and a box of cigars. He got me a lot of votes by speaking to folks pleasantly. A lot of people would hate to offend him in the dead of winter, when they hadn't paid their coal bills, and didn't know how they were ever going to pay 'em. He followed the town clerk right around and shook hands with everybody after the clerk did. 'No,' he'd say, 'I won't tell you how to vote, that wouldn't be right. You got to vote as you see fit! But I'll tell you how I voted. And I'm not ashamed to, either. I wouldn't vote for that stupid, half-breed grease ball of a town clerk we have, who thinks he can get people to vote for him by smirking at 'em and shaking hands. No sir! I voted for Mrs. Quabbin, 'cause she's a capable woman and will do a good job for the town. Don't see her mincing and smirking do yer? Nor shaking hands with people just to get their votes? I guess not. I voted for Mrs. Quabbin!' He's a case that coal man is.

"Each side had a number of autos and sleighs that were busy all the time bringing the voters in. Some people who hadn't voted for years were brought in. Some had lost the use of their legs and had to be carried. Others could barely see and had to be lead. My side, being run by the undertakers, was accused of bringing voters up out of the burying ground!

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"Oh, the people had lots of fun. Most people seem to like to rally 'round and do things as a team. There isn't a lot of excitement in a place like this, you know. And here was the whole town stirred up and divided into two teams, each trying to see who could get the

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most votes. I guess the whole town hadn't had a chance to rally around that way since our ancestors used to rally around and fight Indians — probably Indian fighting was the ancestor of community effort here in New England.

“As usual, the men had the best time. They smoked the coal man's cigars, and I guess somebody donated some hard cider. But I don't think either the town clerk or I had a good time at all. I know I didn't. As the day wore on, he looked as if he were going to bawl, in spite of the wooden smile that was frozen on his face like the ones Alaska people carve on totem poles. I don't suppose I looked any better. And I must have lost forty pounds. The worst of it came after the polls were closed and they were counting the ballots. Finally, the returns were handed to the town clerk to read, and I began to perk up. His eyes got bigger and more calf-like than usual, and his lower lip was trembling! He managed to read in a weak voices and then he practically run out of the hall. I had won by one vote! He was supposed to swear we in. But he wasn't there, so they got another justice of the peace. I had quite a time getting the books and documents and the safe. He annoyed me in every way he could. But that's over now. He wouldn't go out anywhere for a while. But he even comes to town 8 meeting now.

“You know the town clerk gets twenty-five cents for every officer he swears in. All the other officers take over right away, but the clerk has to wait a week before he can take up his duties. The moderator of the meeting where he was elected swears him in. The time I was elected there wasn't any moderators for it was just an election. The old clerk couldn't have acted as clerk in swearing me in — that wouldn't be legal — but as justice of the peace, which he was. When he ran off he lost a quarter.

“Most clerks get quite a bit of money in fees during the course of a year. Sometimes they get more money in fees than they do in salaries. For recording each birth the clerk gets a dollar, for each marriage, fifty cents. For each death the clerk gets a dollar if he gets the facts himself. If the board of health, or the undertaker make the death returns the clerk gets but fifty cents. The physician and the undertaker, or whoever fills out the

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return, gets twenty-five cents. All you have to do to make twenty-five cents is to find a birth somewhere, get a blank from me and fill it out properly. There's no catch to it. I'm supposed to give public notice each year that I have the blanks. Chapter 46, section 15.

"I suppose there are quite a lot of things that I don't do that I should according to law. Chapter 66, section 7 says that every town clerk shall have ' the custody of all records of proprietors of towns, townships, plantations or common lands, if the towns, townships, plantations or common lands to which such records relate, or the larger part 9 thereof, are within his town and the proprietors have ceased to be a body politic.' Well, there are Indian deeds in this town which the Indians gave the proprietors. They were written by white men. But the Indians put their marks on them, and they are real interesting looking. But they are not in my custody, and not likely to be. The descendants of the original proprietors hang onto them. They look on the deeds as their own property. It having been handed down to them by their ancestors. They think they are very valuable, and worth a lot of money. If I should call their attention to the law and ask them to turn those documents over for me to put in my safe, I wouldn't be town clerk long. They'd have me out of office quicker than the undertaker got the former town clerk. They'll find out some day, though, when they try to sell one that people who deal in such things won't buy a public document. The Declaration of Independence may be a pretty valuable document. But when it comes to dollars and cents, what it would bring in the open market is just nothing. No dealer is going to buy the Declaration of Independence just because a feller brings it to him, and points out his ancestor's signature. And it is the same with these other documents that by law should be turned over to me. But I'm not doing anything about it. I have troubles enough without punching up more. I have to sort of choose which laws I shall obey in order to stay in the town clerk business. " James Somerset, Town Treasurer, sat at the roll top desk in the corner of his dining room. He tilted back in his swivel chair, clasped his hands about one knee that he pulled to the level of his chin, and rested the other on the top of the cluttered desk. He was a man in his sixties, or early seventies, bald, with a gray shoebrush

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mustache and droopy eyeglasses that he peered over and around as he spoke. He gazed off into space.

"I am the Town Treasurer. I have been Town Treasurer for a good many years now. But I always get worried around Town Meetin' time, when they hold the annual elections. If I shouldn't be re-elected, but should lose my job and the salary that goes with it, me and my family would have to go on the town, I expect. I worry awful. And I'm all of a sweat when the clerk gets up to read the returns from the town election. I've been re-elected every time so far, but maybe a time will come when I ain't. One Town Treasurer we had once got re-elected and then he dropped dead a few days afterwards. He never knew what it was not to get re-elected. And I think that's a pretty nice way to go - not that I'm ready to go just yet - or even thinking about it serious. I think I'm tough enough to stand a few more re-elections. But I don't hanker to get any lickings.

"In same towns they combine the Tax Collector's job with the Town Treasurer's. And in others they combine the Treasurer and Town Clerk. That's to save the town a salary. In some towns they combine all the jobs they can combine, I expect. But being Town Treasurer is trouble enough for me.

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"A Town Treasurer's job is a pretty responsible one. In the first place, he's bonded. And it ain't everybody that the bonding companies will bond. And then the treasurer has all the town's money to look after. Nobody else is allowed to pay a bill for the town - not by law. And one of the worst jobs is having to bring court action on notes and securities that don't turn out as they're supposed to.

"Every so often we've had trouble in our town with town treasurers. Treasurer trouble in this town seems to go in cycles like droughts and hard winters. It ain't so much dishonesty as it is carelessness and relyin' on human nature. If you always do the right thing yourself,

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you kind of expect the other feller to do the right thing to. Well, it don't work out. Not in the town treasurer business.

"We had one of those trusting treasurers here once. The selectman who had charge of the roads then used to pay off the road gang himself and then tell the treasurer how much the payroll was. The treasurer would draw out of the town funds enough to reimburse the selectman, and think nothing of it. But when the selectman put up a business block they begun to wonder where the money come from. And they looked into it and found out.

"Another treasurer got into a jamb in a different way. And I'm not sure that it was, his fault at all. Although, of course, he was on the wrong side of the law and they took it out of his hide.

"I don't know as I can explain this to you unless you understand that no money is spent by a town dur ng during the year except what has been 3 appropriated by a town meeting. If anybody has the spending of an appropriation and it runs out, the only way he can get more is to have a special town meeting called and get it appropriated then. Well, town meetings cost money. The constables have to be paid for posting the warrants. The Moderator and other officials are paid. Maybe the hall has to be heated. And it don't seem just right to spend twenty or thirty dollars to have the town tell you it's all right to do something that you know is all right to do anyway. But that's the law.

"Say the annual town meeting appropriated a thousand dollars for repairs to the town hall. If the repairs cost only eight hundred they'd be two hundred to go into surplus revenue - just sitting in the bank. But, maybe, when the workmen got things opened up, they saw that they was more to be done than they figured on. Commonsense says that they ought to make these other repairs when they got things opened up - that it would be a lot cheaper to do it then. Maybe, they guessed that they could do it for the two hundred they had left over. If they could, well and good. But, if they run over the two hundred - which they hadn't any legal right to do - they used to carry the amount as an overdraft, and tell



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about it at the next town meeting. The voters would understand how it happened, and would appropriate the money to make it up. You understand, it wasn't as though the town was busted and these overdrafts meant no funds in the bank. They didn't have nothing to do with the bank. It was just as if a man had money in every pocket. In one it [?] was for rent, in another it was for cigars, and in another [?] it was for gas. Maybe the 4 price of gas went up on him and he spent all the money in the gas pocket. Then they was a funeral where he had to be a bearer. 'Course, he'd draw on his cigar for gas. He wouldn't go running to his boss and tell him he didn't have no money for gas - not with his other pockets full.

"That's the way they would reason it. And overdrafts on different accounts were the regular thing. It went along all right until the State Director of Accounts, or one of his men, walked in. They clamped down, and the outcome was that the treasurer had to pay all the overdrafts himself. That don't seem right nor fair until you remember that it ain't very hard to write 'overdraft so much' at the end of a number of accounts and if the town makes the overdrafts good you got some extry money.

"As far as the State is concerned, if they get the roof off the town hall and don't have money enough to put it back on they's only one thing to do. And that's to call a special town meeting, 'cause, maybe, the voters don't want no roof on the town hall, so they won't put up the money. You have to draw up your articles, and have the warrant posted for a special meeting, same as you have to for the regular one. And the warrant has to be up at least ten days before the date of the meeting. There'll be that long to wait anyhow. But you don't find me saying that of course the voters will vote the money to have the roof put on, so go aheas, use your common sense and put it on without going through that rigamarole, I'll pay the overdraft out of the general fund. No sir, you don't hear me saying that. I might pay it out of Contingency — if it was a real contingency. But the safest way to get town money out of me is to estimate plenty high enough in the first place what the job will cost. This has 5 a drawback from the taxpayer's point of view, too. It makes taxes higher than they need be - raising a lot of money the town isn't going to need.

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Theoretically, the unused money left in all the accounts it transferred, and that cuts down the taxes to be raised the following year. But the way it works out, somebody moves for a new bridge, or sunthin', and says proudly that it won't cost the taxpayers a cent for it can come out of surplus revenue. Of courses the voters fall for that every time. That's good and simple: a bridge for nothin'. Sure, let's have it. They don't understand bookkeeping. If I, or the town accountant try to explain it, they don't understand. All they want to know is whether they have the money, or whether they haven't. The answer is they have the money, but...Andthey don't want to hear anything about the 'but'. As they have the money they might as well spend it, they reason.

"Besides being the town bookkeeper as far as the real money is concerned, I have to render annually a true account of all my receipts and disbursements and a report of my official acts - that's the law. This report is printed along with the reports of the other officers in the Annual Report of the Town and given every voter. 'Course, like other small towns, we skin the law pretty close here and there where we figger it's safe. The Town Accountant has a set of books, and I let him tell what I did with the money as far as the Town Report is concerned.

"Maybe, you ain't got this town money business straight. Mighty few voters have. About all they understand is that if they want any money from the town to fix a road, which the selectmen ain't been looking after, or to erect a memorial to Tom, Dick, or Harry Cutthroat, who was born here, that they got to get up an article for the town warrant. And that they got 6 to get [that?] article to the selectmen in time to get it included in the town meeting warrant they want it in. If they don't do it, it'll be held over until the next warrant is made out. Sometimes the selectmen don't want an article in. If they don't they won't accept. They have to, though, if the feller with the article can get ten voters to sign it. Some of 'em don't know that, and think they can't do nothin' when the selectmen turn 'em down. Then they got to get people to get up in town meeting and move that the proper amount of money - and they got to say what it is - be "raised and appropriated" for the purpose. 'Raised' by taxation that is. And 'appropriated' means that the amount be set aside to be drawn on for

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that purpose. And then the article has to be seconded. And people ought to speak for it, so's the voters will know what it is all about. Heh! You don't need to get anybody to speak against it. They's always plenty of people who will arise on the spur of the moment for that job. And then you got to win the vote.

“Well, when the ordinary voter gets his article passed by the Town Meeting, he thinks all he has to do is go ahead and spend the money and that I'll reimburse him. Or, if he don't have the money to spend that I'll give him a check. Or, that he can run up a bill, and / have the bill sent to me, and that I'll pay it. Not on your tintype - not as long as I'm bonded! They's quite a bit more to it.

“First, the money has to be raised and the Assessors work on the figures first, and then the Tax Collector gets the actual money, which he 7 turns over to me. I got other town money, too. Interest on bonds, and cash money that people have given the town to keep in savings banks and use the interest for certain purposes, or maybe I've borrowed money for the town in anticipation of taxes. I have to keep all these things in my books, along with where I've reinvested funds, or paid off a loan - all that sort of thing, ealing dealing with the handling of the actual money. Maybe, if that article I was talking about had said ‘appropriated’ and nothin’ about ‘raising’ it, I could do sunthin’. But it would have to have named a certain account from which the money was to be appropriated. If there didn't happen to be enough money in that account, the feller would have been out of luck. Town officers can do funny things, perfectly legal, too, so it's safer for anybody to say ‘raise’. You can't get out of doing that.

“The Town Accountant has to keep books with not only every appropriation in ‘em, with receipts and disbursements for every one, but with all the receipts of the town noted in ‘em too, and where the money come from. How much each assessment was and where it was levied. And, if the town abated anybody's taxes that has to go in, too. He keeps a register of the securities on every person's bond, when it affects the town, so's if any of us bonded officials light out with any of town's loose cash, he'll know who to collect from

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without bothering to catch us. He has to keep a record of everything to do with the town debt. He has to show why the debt was incurred, and when. And the rate of interest. And the arrangements made for paying it. He keeps all the originals of the town contracts, too.

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He knows more about where the town stands than they do. Once a year, time enough before the end of the town's fiscal year, the accountant has to get up a detailed statement, and peddle it around, so that the head ones can estimate how much money they need to ask the Town Meeting for. The town has a finance committee that considers the amounts each one asks, and makes recommendations. And the selectmen have the whole thing printed in the Town Report.

"Lots of voters don't understand about me and the town accountant meeting with the selectmen. The voters come to see the selectmen and they figger we're just nosey and sitting there to listen in on what they have to say. But I guess I've said enough so that you understand it. The selectmen don't dast do a thing without the town accountant being there to tell 'em whether or not there's money available to do it with. Maybe, the selectmen could worry along without me. But I figger I'm accommodating a lot of voters by being handy.

"S'pose a feller that had got an article by the Town Meeting shows up. He's mad at me because he knows I know his article passed, but still, I won't give him any of the town's money. I've told him over and over that he'll have to give me a warrant before I'll give him a check. But he thinks I'm only stalling, so he comes to the selectmen. The Selectmen ask the Town Accountant if it's all right to draw against that appropriation. He says it is if the feller and a majority of the board will kindly sign a warrant. He make out a warrant, which in this case is really an order, the feller signs it, and the board [sinns?] signs , it, then 9 I take it and give the feller a check for the amount it says on it. That's the way all town money is spent. And, as far as I'm concerned, they ain't no short way of doing it. The feller could, of course, go to the town accountant's house. And, if he warn't home, go to where he was working, and make a date to get a warrant. When the accountant got ti e

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[tise?] he'd look it up in his books. And, if the feller was entitled to it, give him a warrant. Then the feller could chase the selectmen a round and find they didn't have no ink nor pen to sign it with. He'd have to chase 'em separately. And then he'd have to find me. If he managed to get the warrant all properly make out, I'd see that he got his check - he wouldn't have to do more runnin'. But it's a dum sight easier all around to meet together every other Tuesday night and do business all in one place. If I warn't there, they'd say I wasn't 'tending to business. 'Cause I am, they say that's because I'm trying to find out and butt into things that are none of my business. Well, that's the way it goes in the town office perfection!"